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Secretary bird,
**OR HOW AN ETYMOLOGICAL DICTIONARY
SHOULD BE WRITTEN AND BY WHOM**

1. Introduction

If judged from the point of view of the number of dictionaries published, etymology would seem one of the better studied areas of the English language. The fact is that most of these dictionaries are intended for large audiences and are more popular than scientific in their treatment of the subject. There are, however, several dictionaries that at the time of their publication were greeted with admiration by linguists and nowadays are still considered by many as reliable sources (e.g. Skeat, OED, ODEE or Klein for Modern English, but also Holthausen for Old English). Still, if we compare them to the etymological dictionaries available for other languages (e.g. Feist for Gothic or Vasmer for Russian, etc.), we can notice certain fundamental differences as far as the treatment of the subject matter.

**2. Liberman's diagnosis
and the concept of an analytic dictionary of English etymology**

In various publications Liberman (cf. especially 1994, but also 2002 and 2005) has developed the concept of an analytic dictionary of English etymology. According to his approach, modern etymological dictionaries typologically fall into two categories, which he terms analytic and dogmatic. Ideally, dictionaries of the first type (he gives such examples as Feist and Vasmer) summarize the literature for each entry, give alternative hypotheses concerning etymology (with references), and evaluate them in order to choose the most probable one or to dismiss all of them as improbable (the case of "unknown origin"). Dictionaries of the second type (e.g. Skeat, Weekley, OED or ODEE)¹ present usually

¹ Although both Skeat and, especially, OED occasionally discuss various etymological proposals for a single entry, they almost never cite their sources, which makes it impossible to trace the development of the ideas.

only one etymology, the one which the author fancies most, but without giving any reasons for this choice or discussion of alternative proposals. In the case of words whose etymology is unknown, such dictionaries will say precisely this – “origin uncertain / origin unknown” – without any specification what this cover term actually stands for. As Liberman shows (cf. e.g. 2002) it is almost never the case that nothing is known about the word. Usually at least some cognates or words similar in form and meaning have been identified; sometimes even hypotheses concerning the origin exist as well, though they have not gained much renown among scholars. If a problem is reduced to the phrase “origin unknown”, all these details are unavailable to the reader. In fact, a summary of these details would provide a perfect starting point for future research, which actually should be one of the main reasons for publishing an etymological dictionary. It is often forgotten that a truly academic etymological dictionary should be a kind of report on the state of research, not necessarily an ultimate source of “correct” etymologies. It is a frequent opinion among etymologists that the primary purpose of an etymological dictionary is rather to summarize than to provide solutions.

A glance at the examples of each type of dictionary repeated above after Liberman suggests that virtually all modern etymological dictionaries of English belong to the second category. Until roughly the second half of the 19th century, such dictionaries were predominantly analytic ones. Due to the lack of more objective criteria for assessing etymologies, etymology was based on conjecture. It was then useful to summarize all the previous suggestions, just in case one of them is better than others. The discovery of sound laws gave etymologists more confidence in what they were doing. As a result, the authors of English etymological dictionaries started questioning most of the views that had been presented by their predecessors. The dictionaries became dogmatic. To make matters even worse, according to Liberman (2006), Skeat and to some extent OED are the last truly original full-scale contributions to the research into English etymology. Since its publication most etymological dictionaries (including ODEE) have been products of the constant recycling of the etymologies contained in Skeat and OED.

Consequently, for the last twenty years Liberman and his colleagues have been working on an analytic dictionary of English etymology. As summarized in Liberman 1994, the dictionary is going to be issued in several volumes, each dealing with a different section of the English vocabulary. The vocabulary is divided according to the etymological information that is available on these words (e.g. words with no cognates in other languages, words with cognates in West Germanic, words with cognates in Germanic, words borrowed from Latin and Greek, etc.).

3. Applicability of the idea to the study of (Oriental) borrowings in English

Although Liberman is concerned more with native words (inherited from PIE or PGmc) than borrowings, his approach to constructing an etymological dictionary is relevant for such studies as well. His views concerning the general etymological dictionaries of English are also relevant here – there is a striking shortage of thorough survey publications. As far as Oriental borrowings in English are concerned, some important works were published at the turn of the 20th century (e.g. Fennell 1892, Yule & Burnell 1903, Serjeantson 1935). Unfortunately, Oriental borrowings constituted only one of the layers of vocabulary covered there. It is therefore natural that the analysis could not be very thorough. In the preface to the first volume of his dictionary Klein (1966: ix) prides himself on the fact that his work contains approximately 750 words of Semitic origin. As for modern contributions, an overview of this section of English vocabulary is offered by Cannon (1994, 1996, 2001 and 2007). However, it is nothing surprising to note that all these works are, unfortunately, predominantly dogmatic.

Consequently, the need for an analytic overview study of Oriental borrowings is indeed urgent. Such a study would have to include not only the hypotheses concerning the origin but also the necessary philological/historical background concerning the word and the time of its first attestation. There is also one other aspect of the study of borrowings that differentiates them from the study of native vocabulary. It is often the case that determining the ultimate source is much easier than establishing the routes of transmission. Usually a borrowing is transmitted via different routes, which is reflected in the variety of the earliest forms attested in the receiving language. Here the dialectology of the donor and transmitting languages often comes into play. A proper academic study would have to discuss such issues.

4. A hypothetical sample entry

For the sake of comparison, two entries are presented in this section. The first one is copied from Cannon 1994 (it is repeated intact in Cannon 2007). The second one is a hypothetical entry, constructed by the author of the present article on the model of sample entries from Liberman's dictionary published on the Internet. His entries contain a short summary of the problem given in italics, followed by the main article, usually divided into sections.

Both entries concern a problematic lexeme, *secretary bird*, which is the name of an African bird.

4.1.

secretary bird, n. (1797) Birds [Poss. F & Ar; F *secrétaire*; poss. directly < Sudanese Ar *ṣagr-al-ṭēr* < *ṣagr* hawk + *al-ṭēr* the birds collectively; or by F folk etym. < this Ar compound; or poss. a name created because the bird's crest resembles a bunch of quills stuck behind the ear + E bird] A large, long-legged bird of prey of south Africa. O, R, W [4]
(Cannon 1994: 296)

4.2.

SECRETARY BIRD (1781)

Although the bird's name is popularly thought to be derived from the crest of feathers resembling quills stuck behind a clerk's ear, its true origin is far from certain. At least one of the suggested alternatives seems also plausible, though still not proved conclusively.

The sections are devoted to: 1) the first descriptions of the species, 2) the name in European languages, 3) three alternative etymologies, 4) the evaluation of the etymologies.

1. This particular bird of prey (*Sagittarius serpentarius*) is native to Africa and generally lives in the territories south of Sahara. In Europe this species was virtually unknown until the second half of the 18th century. The first descriptions were made by the explorers of the Cape of Good Hope, which at that time was a Dutch colony. It is to them that the popularization of the name should be attributed.

Probably the first reference to the bird that has survived to our times is the one made by Peter Kolb (1719 [1741]: 173). He mentions the bird under the name used by the Dutch colonists of the cape – *Slangen-vreeter* 'snake-eater'.² This Dutch name was apparently a translation of a name given to the bird by the natives (Sparrman 1783 [1787]: 164). As pointed out by Le Vaillant (1795, vol. II: 273), Kolb makes a mistake by translating the name as *Pelican*, thus confusing two different species for one.

The first correct identification of the bird was made by Vosmaer under the name *Sagittarius* in his treatise *Description d'un Oiseau de*

² The origin of the name is obvious – the bird preys on snakes. Until the name of the bird had been settled on *secretary*, this particular habit of the bird was sometimes used for reference, cf. for example *African snake-eater* in Shaw (1809). The reference to snakes is also present in the Latin name *Sagittarius serpentarius*, as well as in H. *kígyászkeselyű* 'snake vulture', Cz. *hadilov pisař* 'secretary the reptile-hunter' and an older German name (nowadays obsolete) *Schlangenadler* 'snake-eagle' (Oken 1837: 152).

proie, nommé le Sagittaire in 1769. The first description of the bird in English is given by Edwards (1771: 55-6). He himself does not give any name but the name *Sagittarius* is supplied by the editor in a footnote as the name mentioned by Vosmaer. The first mention of the name *secrétaire* is made by Sonnerat (1776: 87). He seems to have made a mistake though. He claims to have seen the species in the Philippines, which is rather unlikely because the bird is not known outside Africa. Nevertheless, he names the bird *secrétaire* in reference to the African one.

2. The name is common all over Europe. Examples include: in IE languages – Eng. *secretary bird*, D. *sekretärfugl*, G. *Serkretär(vogel)* (also *Schicksalsvogel*), Dutch *sekretarisvogel*, Sp. *secretario*, Port. *secretário*, Fr. *secrétaire* (also *serpenteaire* or *messenger sagittaire*), It. *segretario* (also *serpentario*), Lith. *sekretorius*, Pl. *sekretarz*, Rus. *нму-ча-секретарь*; in non-IE languages – Est. *sekretärlind* (or *kurgkot-kas*) and Fin. *sihteeri*. In some languages the word *secretary* is replaced by another word with the same meaning, e.g. in Cz. *hadilov písař*.

In English the name is first attested in 1781 in a translation of Sonnerat from French (according to OED). Therefore, it is French that is the immediate source of the English word.

3. Three alternative hypotheses have been suggested as far as the origin of the bird's name is concerned. These follow below according to their chronology.

a. *secretarius* < corr. of *sagittarius* 'archer' (because the bird resembles an archer preparing to shoot)

It seems that this hypothesis is mentioned only in EB,³ which suggests that it never gained popularity. Until the remaining two possibilities are ruled out, this one seems the least satisfactory.

³ According to EB, the suggestion is given by Vosmaer in his treatise of 1763:

He was told that at the Cape of Good Hope the bird was known as the "Sagittarius" or Archer, from its striding gait being thought to resemble that of a bowman advancing to shoot, but that this name had been corrupted into that of "Secretarius". (EB, vol. XXIV: 571)

The author did not have access to the original work. However, the author of the present article could not find any other mention of the name *secretarius* as given by Vosmaer among the authors who refer to him. The only name they cite as occurring in Vosmaer's work is *sagittarius* (e.g. Shaw 1806: 46, or the footnote given in Edwards 1771: 55).

b. analogy between a tuft of feathers on the back of the bird's head and quills stuck behind a clerk's ear

This is the most popular hypothesis. It is mentioned in OED, EB, Webster, TLF, Le Robert and many other sources not necessarily concerned primarily with etymology. It is also present in the writings of early explorers, e.g. Le Vaillant (1795: 272).

c. Fr. *secrétaire* < corr. of Ar. *ṣaqr at-tair*⁴

This is a comparatively recent hypothesis. The earliest source that the author of the present paper was able to locate is Steyn (1983, after Urban 1984: 640). It seems that the idea was put forward for the first time by one of the members of South African Ornithological Society, Richard Brooke. The Arabic phrase is assumed to mean 'hunter bird', where *ṣaqr* means 'hawk, hunting bird' and *tair* is a collective for 'birds'. The same etymology is repeated e.g. in Cannon 1994 and Kemp 1994.

4. Although the derivation in **c** may seem the most attractive one, it presents certain difficulties. First of all, the Arabic phrase itself is problematic. A comment is needed concerning its constituent parts, i.e. *ṣaqr* and *tair*. In both Classical and Modern Standard Arabic (cf. Wehr or Lane) the first component may refer to 'hawk', 'falcon' or any kind of bird used in falconry.⁵ Therefore, it does not simply mean 'a bird that hunts' but rather 'a bird that is used for hunting'. The second component of the phrase, *tair*, is an uncountable collective noun for 'birds' in general and it is rather unlikely that it could refer to a single bird. Consequently, such a phrase would rather mean 'birds used in falconry' and not 'a hunter bird'. What is significant, it seems that the secretary bird has never been used in falconry.

Secondly, the phrase *ṣaqr at-tair* and its dialectal variant given in Cannon (1994) do not seem to be present in the modern dictionaries of Arabic, neither those concerning the standard nor those concerning the dialects. The other names for 'secretary bird' are, however, present. Elias gives *kātib* among others, which literally means 'someone who writes', and may refer to a clerk. This seems a formation under the in-

⁴ A comment is needed on the transliteration of the Arabic phrase given in the sources. Steyn gives *saqr et-tair* (after Urban 1984: 640) and Kemp (1994) *saqr-el-tair*. Cannon (1994) gives Sudanese Ar. *ṣagr al-tēr*, whereas Cannon (2007) has *ṣagr al-tēr*. The standard ISO transliteration would be *ṣaqr at-tayr* for Standard Arabic and *ṣagr at-tēr* for a dialectal variant.

⁵ The word has been borrowed to European languages as the name for one of the falcons, the *saker falcon*.

fluence of European languages. Nevertheless, the conclusion is that either the bird is no longer referred to by the name *ṣaqr at-ṭair* or it never has.

The last problem with this hypothesis is that it is quite recent. No reference to it could be found before 1982, not to mention at the turn of the 19th century. Here the derivation **b**, which has some elements of folk etymology, has one important advantage – it has a long tradition. It was mentioned in the earliest descriptions of the bird, which is significant because it is easier to defend a claim by the contemporary travelers than any present one, however brilliant, without any confirmation in the relevant period.

In order to conclusively prove the third hypothesis a thorough study is needed of the numerous Arabic dictionaries written by Arab authors up to the beginning of the 19th century. This task, however, is beyond the scope and competence of lexicographers of European languages and should be carried out by an Arabist.

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It seems that for an adequate analysis of Oriental borrowings in English (or any other borrowings in any other language for that matter) a team of scholars is needed comprising specialists in the receiving language and in the donor language. In the case of Arabic loanwords in English such a team would have to include both an Anglicist and an Arabist to ensure that the relevant vocabulary is adequately investigated as if from both ends. Otherwise the result will be either incomplete or inaccurate (as evidenced by the entry above).

The problem has been exemplified with the name *secretary bird*. The choosing of this particular example was not entirely arbitrary. It illustrates another interesting point – the complexity of language contacts. The Arabic word *kātib* as the name for this species is most probably a loanword from Europe. Therefore, if such a team could conclusively establish that the name was indeed originally Arabic, the word would be an interesting case of a Rückwanderer – conceptual rather than lexical, because it is the association with the clerk that returned and not the lexical item itself. Finally, if the derivation of the name from Arabic was proved correct, then the name *sagittarius* could possibly be assumed as another, perhaps even earlier, product of the corruption of Ar. *ṣaqr at-ṭair*.

However, irrespective of the ultimate results, cooperation on investigating such words would be beneficial to both parties, Anglicists and Arabists in this particular case.

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